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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 002339

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DEPT FOR EUR/ERA, NEA/NGI, NEA/IPA, NEA/ELA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/16/2015

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SUBJECT: UK PLANS FOR ITS EU PRESIDENCY: MIDDLE EAST ISSUES

Classified By: USEU POLOFF LEE LITZENBERGER; REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

1. (C) Summary. According to UK mission staff in Brussels who cover Middle East issues, the UK hopes to use its July-December EU presidency to work closely with the U.S. in promoting a common agenda. On Iraq, the UK hopes the June 22 conference will help move the EU to do more on rule of law and human rights. On Syria, the UK and France are pressing the Commission not to move forward on the EU-Syria Association Agreement, and would welcome the U.S. weighing in. On MEPP, the UK will push for full EU support for the Wolfensohn mission, and may seek to clarify what EU contact policy on Hamas is, and is not. On Iran, the UK sees EU positions hardening; should EU3 negotiations break down, UK believes it likely the EU will support referral to the UNSC. Once there, however, the UK will be in a somewhat awkward position: as EU president, it must present member state views, but is free to vote as it wishes. End Summary.

Iraq: Looking for the Iraq Conference to support ramped up EU presence

2. (C) In a June 16 meeting with USEU Poloff and Development Counselor, UK mission staff that cover Middle East issues previewed the UK's July-December 2005 EU Presidency goals for the region. The UK has proposed a sentence for inclusion in the conclusions for the June 22 Iraq Conference in Brussels that it hopes will facilitate stepped-up EU activity in the areas of rule of law and human rights. The UK thinks the EU has relevant expertise in these areas and can make a positive contribution, but it appears uncertain if the UK proposal will get much support among members. The UK is sensitive to EU member state concerns that the UK plans to use its presidency to launch "a thousand Iraq initiatives," and would prefer having the June 22 conference provide some political cover for enhanced EU activities and presence in Iraq. Commissioner Ferrero-Waldner recently announced plans to open a Commission office in Baghdad "within the next few months," and the UK has offered to provide space, support and security in its mission. The UK wants to build on this by proposing an agenda to accompany an enhanced presence on the ground, but building a consensus among member states will require some effort and is not automatic.

Syria Association Agreement: UK nervous

3. (C) On Syria, the UK is concerned that the Commission will forward the Syria Association Agreement to the UK when it assumes the EU presidency on July 1, and asked the U.S. to weigh in with the Commission. Poloff responded that he had raised the issue with Commission Middle East Director the evening before. Leffler adamantly denied that the Commission sought to move the agreement forward. He claimed the translation and other technical procedures involved in preparing the texts would last until September, nearly a year since the document was initialed. The ball, he said, was in member states' court whether to move the agreement forward or not. Our UK contacts disagreed. They said Leffler had recently told UK Middle East Director Gooderham that the translations would be completed by the end of June "at the latest;" Leffler planned to forward the agreement to the UK, as EU president, in early July. The next step in the process involves the Council referring the texts to juris linguists, who need approximately six weeks to consider them. Due to the August break, this means it would be September before the Council could act on the texts. If agreed, the Council would then forward the texts to the European Parliament for approval. The earliest the agreement could be signed would thus be late September.

4. (C) The UK wants to put off the signing and also wants to avoid having to discuss this agreement immediately upon assuming the EU presidency, and is pressing the Commission to delay further the translation process. Our UK contacts claimed the French are "furious" with the Commission on this point, and are also pressing for further delay. The UK would welcome the U.S. weighing in on this issue with the Commission, and noted that Gooderham did not mince words when he spoke recently with Leffler. They said we also might want to touch base with the French. UK Foreign Secretary Straw plans to place Syria on the agenda for the July EU Foreign Ministers' meeting (GAERC), but would prefer not to discuss the Association Agreement. Rather, Straw wants to highlight

how unhelpful Syria has been on a range of issues, from Lebanon to Iraq to support for Palestinian extremists and Hizballah, in the hopes of generating a consensus within the EU that now is not the time to be making any gestures toward Damascus. But the UK wants to avoid internal discussion among member states about the Syria agreement, which could be divisive and which would signal Damascus that it can try to divide and separate member states.

MEPP

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15. (C) Given the complexities surrounding Gaza withdrawal and PA elections, it is hard for the UK to plan an MEPP agenda for its EU presidency. The UK's focus will be on supporting the Wolfensohn mission, and will work with member states to be as responsive to his requests for assistance as possible. The UK is pleased with the Commission's representative, Christian Berger, who has been detailed to work with Wolfensohn. Berger will come to Brussels one week per month, and the UK will look to him to act as liaison with Wolfensohn.

MEPP/Hamas

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16. (C) We raised the June 16 wire service reports reporting a meeting between Hamas mayors in Gaza and EU officials, noting that Washington would be monitoring this with interest. Our UK colleagues repeated that, while EU ministers had approved a policy of limited, low-level contacts with elected officials in localities where the EU had projects under way, Hamas remained on the EU's terrorist list. They promised to provide us the exact wording of the EU policy, and acknowledged that the EU has not done a good job articulating its policy in terms that emphasize that Hamas is still considered a terrorist organization. They said they would highlight this issue for London, indicating that the UK will want to manage this issue constructively.

Iran: Italy a weak link?

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17. (C) EU policy toward Iran is focused primarily on the Trade and Cooperation Agreement negotiations, and the parallel political dialogue, currently underway. The next round is planned for mid-July in Tehran. These EU contacts, however, are very much dependent on the EU3 discussions on the nuclear issue. As long as the EU3 process is on track, the EU negotiations will continue; if the EU3 process breaks down, EU talks will also be suspended. Our UK contacts said that, since the EU3 talks have been under way, EU member state positions toward Iran have hardened. As a result, the UK is reasonably comfortable that member states would support referral to the UNSC if the EU3 talks break down. However, our contacts were not certain how much could be achieved once the Iran issue was in the UNSC. The UK would be in a bit of an awkward position. As EU president, it would have an obligation to represent the consensus views of EU members, but would be free to vote as the UK. Regarding ways the U.S. could help, their suggestion was that we might want to weigh in bilaterally with Italy, which has the most commercial interests in Iran, has the most developed political dialogue with Tehran, and has been the hardest to "keep on board" with a toughening EU position on Iran. In part, they explained, this was a hold over from the time of the formation of the EU3, when Italy held the EU presidency. Italy was invited to join the group, but declined due to it holding the EU presidency. The offer was not extended again after Italy's presidency expired.

SCHNABEL

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